

Bringing Back the Natives: Cutthroat Trout Conservation Efforts

Yellowstone cutthroat trout (YCT) is a keystone species within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. In addition to providing delight to thousands of anglers, YCT is a key food for grizzly bears, otters, eagles, ospreys, and mink. Up to 20 percent of the annual diet of grizzly bears around Yellowstone Lake consists of spawning cutthroat trout.

The rivers and streams of the upper Snake, Missouri, Green and Yellowstone River basins teemed with cutthroat trout at the time of Lewis and Clark and other early explorers. YCT historically occurred in the Snake River drainage from the headwaters down to Shoshone Falls in the Columbia River basin, and in the Yellowstone drainage from the headwaters down to at least the confluence of the Bighorn River near Billings, Montana.

Populations have declined from historic levels largely due to habitat changes and influences from non-native fish species that were stocked throughout both basins. Genetically pure YCT populations were substantially reduced over much of the historic range due to hybridization with stocked rainbow and westslope cutthroat trout. Other causes of YCT decline and existing threats include habitat degradation, whirling disease, New Zealand mud snails, and the introduction of non-native fish species (e.g., lake trout) that compete with and prey on YCT.

Because of the decline in distribution, and threats to existing intact populations, the agencies have classified YCT a species of concern, and are taking management and conservation steps to reduce threats and ensure the long-term persistence within its native range. YCT was petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act. The Fish and Wildlife Service determined that listing is not warranted at this time. The Service found that although the number of YCT stocks in large rivers have declined from historic levels, viable self-sustaining populations remain widely distributed throughout the historic range of the subspecies. Many of the strongholds for YCT occur within roadless or wilderness areas, or in Yellowstone National Park, all of which afford considerable protection to the fish.

Conservation Measures

The National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the states of Idaho, Mon-



tana, and Wyoming are working together to “protect the best” of the remaining YCT habitat, and to restore key habitat and populations.

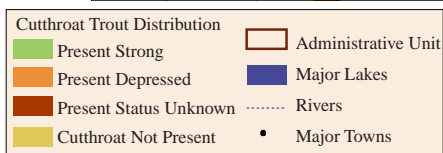
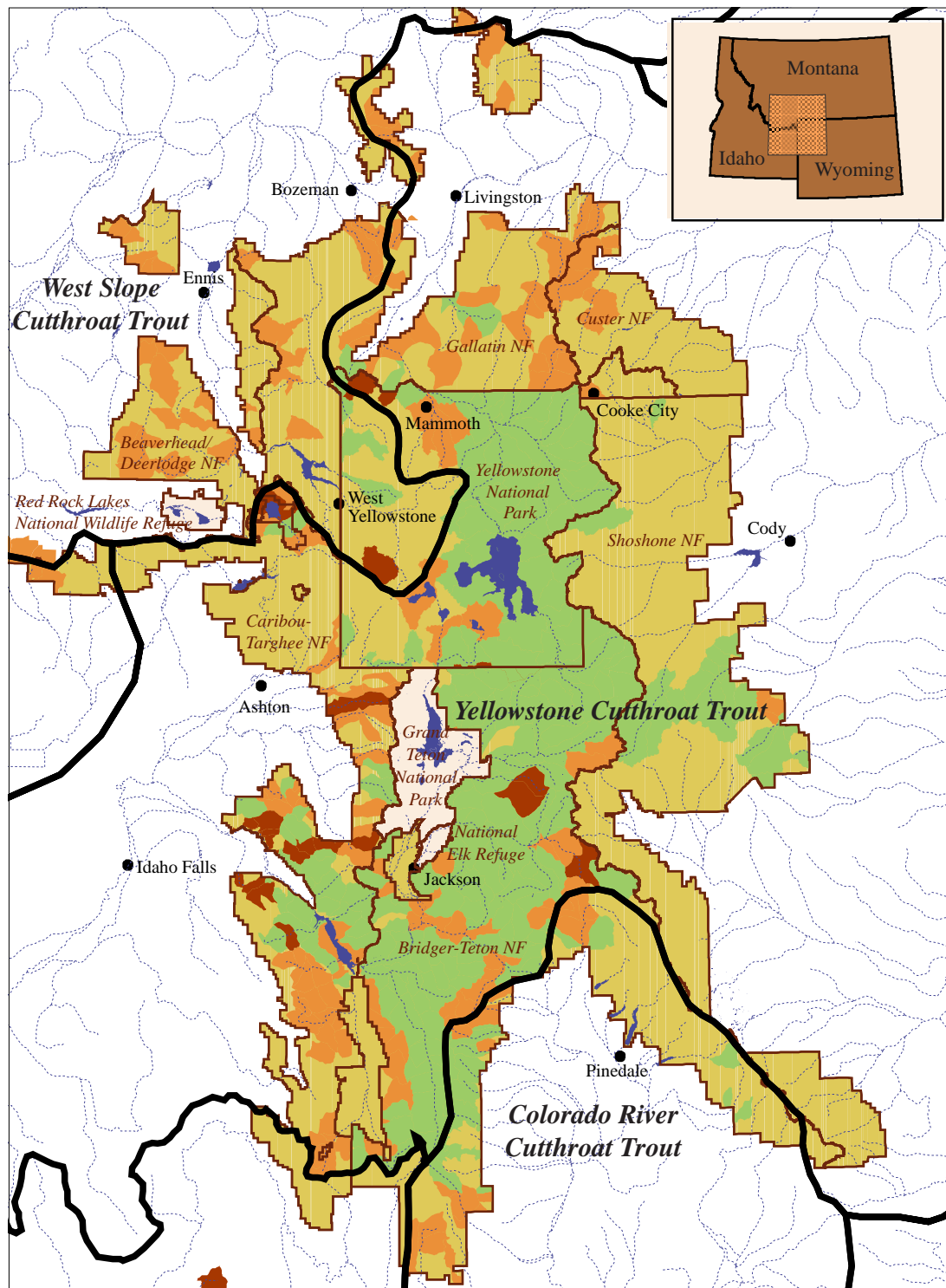
Key management activities include:

- Identify all YCT populations within the historical native range and maintain a database with the most current distribution.
- Identify genetic purity of existing populations. Prioritize populations based on genetic purity, population size, and unique characteristics.
- Secure and enhance all known and suspected genetically pure YCT populations, and high priority hybrid populations. These efforts might include, but are not limited to:
 - Isolation of populations to prevent invasion by hybridizing and/or competing non-native fish.
 - Habitat restoration where possible.
 - Modification of land uses to provide for YCT habitat and population protection.
 - Expansion of current populations within the context of their streams and watersheds.
 - Suppression or eradication of non-native fish species that are competing with, preying on, or hybridizing with native YCT.
 - Stocking of non-native trout will not be planned or carried out in drainages or portions of drainages that support pure YCT where such stocking has the possibility of harming a pure YCT population. Stocking of non-native trout would not occur in habitats selected as potential restoration sites.
 - More restrictive limits will be considered where angler harvest is altering population age/size structure and affecting recruitment.

A public outreach effort specifically addressing YCT conservation will be developed and implemented by the agencies having responsibility for YCT conservation. Public outreach efforts will utilize the many and varied options available to get the native trout story to the public.

GYCC Projects. Over the past two years, GYCC has funded 11 projects to help improve cutthroat trout habitat, inventories, knowledge and awareness. Refer to page 12 for a summary of the projects.

Greater Yellowstone Area: Cutthroat Trout Distribution



25 0 25 Miles

data current as of 2/7/2001
 plot by Wendi Urie gfiles/cttroutdist0207.eps
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*no data for Grand Teton National Park, National Elk Refuge, and Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge

